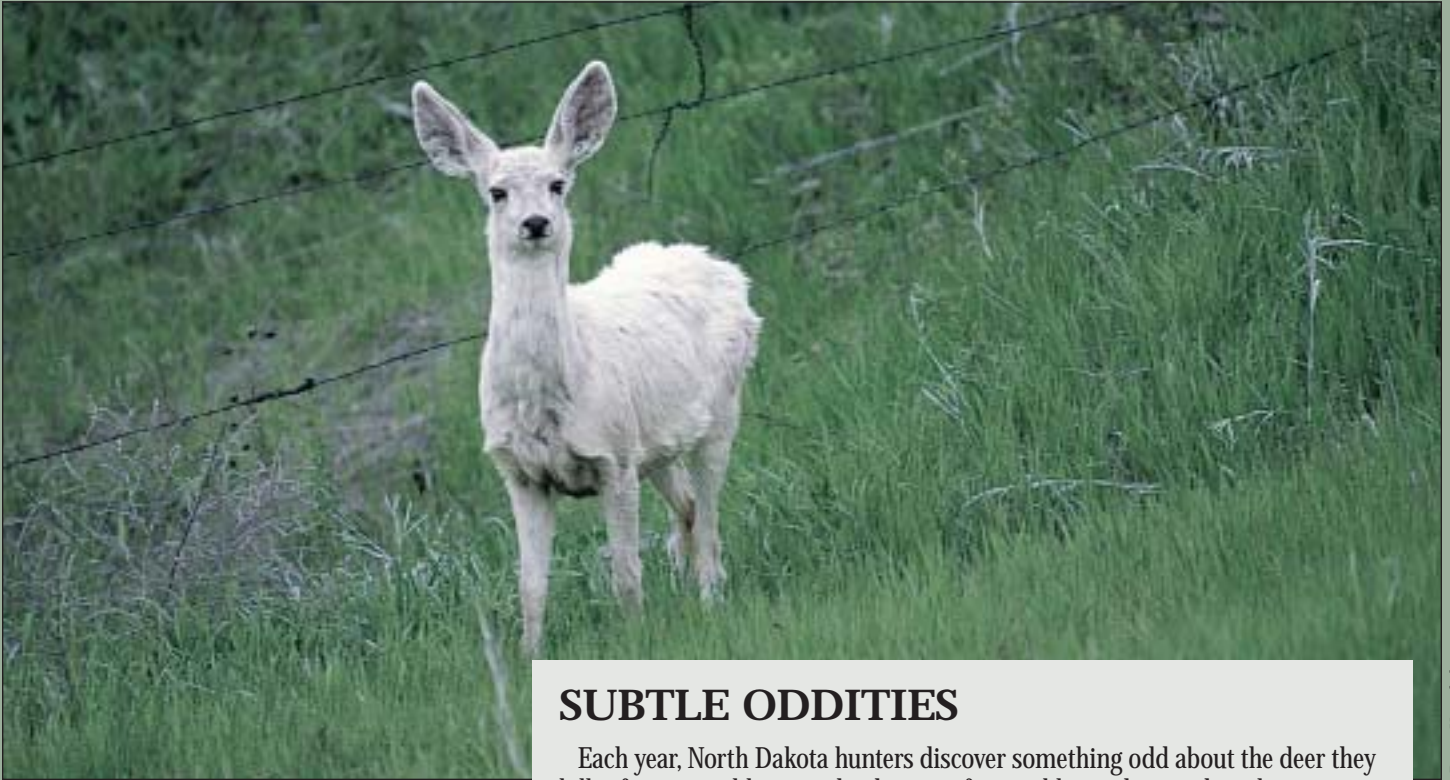


A CLOSER LOOK

By Bill Jensen



Darcy Kramlich

SUBTLE ODDITIES

Each year, North Dakota hunters discover something odd about the deer they kill – from wart-like growths the size of vegetables to does with antlers.

Papillomas or fibromas are benign “warts” found on deer that can range from the size of a pea to a head of cabbage. Typically, these warts grow on the head, neck, shoulders and groin. Like warts on humans, these gray to black lumps are believed to be caused by a virus and are found on both mule and white-tailed deer, and sometimes elk, pronghorn and moose.

Are these “warts” contagious? No, as they are specific to the deer family, particularly mule and white-tailed deer. But can you still eat the venison? In general, if the tumor just involves the skin, the animal’s meat may be eaten without concern. If the skin tumor extends into muscle or deeper, the area around the tumor should be discarded.

“Cactus” bucks, male deer that retain velvet on their antlers after September, are harvested each year. This condition is usually caused by a hormone imbalance due to the testicles not descending, accidental castration, or genetic mis-cues during development. Sometimes, the antlers are not shed and retained from one year to the next, resulting in a mass roughly shaped like a large pine cone. This condition is rare.

Antlers on does can range in size from a short velvet knob to a polished antler several inches long. The small velvet knobs can be inconspicuous, and are fairly common. Polished antlers on an adult doe are much rarer. Antler growth on does may be due to altered hormone levels in the womb while the fetus was developing, or due to genetic mistakes.

Resulting from genetic inheritance, true albinism – all white hair with pink eyes – and melanism – all black hair – in deer is rare in the wild. However, many deer do show varying degrees of hair pigment conditions from white legs and pink hooves to large spots of white and black.

More subtle oddities, such as canine teeth and antler drop tines, occur frequently in deer. If we thought about the variability within our own families – attached ear lobes, tongue rolling, and other differences – it is not surprising that deer and other game animals display them, too.

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